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From the first cry at birth to the last words on the deathbed, oral communication is essential to humankind. Spoken words transmit ideas, shape identities, manage power, give pleasure. Obvious, yes, and yet all too easy to forget when interpreting the past through silent writings, images, and objects. Orality, nevertheless, was even more pervading in medieval and early-modern times than today, and its interactions with writing more complex and mutual. Scholars are increasingly aware that recovering this dimension, albeit difficult and uncertain, is potentially revealing—as this book confirms.

Originated in the conference 'Gossip, Gospel, Governance' (London, 2011) and dedicated to the memory of its co-organiser Alexander Cowan, the volume finds both a limit and a strength in variety. Combining various disciplinary approaches to the voices of diverse figures in disparate countries and periods, it showcases a rich, though inevitably partial, sampler of the many findings awaiting discovery in this field.

An ample Introduction, co-authored by Cohen and Twomey, bravely and insightfully addresses core questions concerning the definition of orality, its operation in pre-modern Europe, how scholars can retrieve it, and how it interacted with literature. Fifteenth chapters follow, distributed into six sections centred on Witches, Trials, Preaching, Street, Gossip, and "Prayer, Teaching and Religious Talk".

Liv Helene Willumsen explores seventeenth-century witchcraft trials in polar Norway, searching the confessions for oral traits and for traces of the oral circulation among local peasants of European demonological notions. In Spain, Susana Gala Pellicer analyses different versions of the prayer to St Helena, a love charm recited to the Inquisition by two *hechiceras*

(sorceresses) in 1623 and 1633, and resurfacing today on the web, orally transmitted for generations.

The depositions sent by German villages to the Imperial Chamber Court were so faithfully recorded as to reflect, as Matthias Bähr argues, the worldview of early-modern rural communities and how they used speech for negotiating power. Generous in vivid quotations and analyses, Thomas Cohen's search for sixteenth-century conversations in the transcripts of Roman courts discloses dialogues artfully reported by witnesses and even live recordings of quarrels between them.

The section on preaching includes Anne Régent-Susini's essay on the performance of missionary sermons in seventeenth-century France, focused on emotional reactions and visual components; Carolina Rosada's article on Vicente Ferrer's sermons as engaging oral events championing his uncompromising campaign to either convert or segregate Jews in early fiftheenth-century Castile, and Sonia Suman's case study about the spectacular social occasions created by the performance of sermons at St Mary Spital in late sixteenth-century London.

Through London's admiralty court depositions, Richard Blackmore investigates seventeenth-century sailors' talk and how it defined individual stances towards labour, gender and authority, both aboard and ashore. Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers delve into the political messages spread among urban audiences by libels, poems, prophecies and plays composed, and often publicly performed, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Netherlands. Marcus Harmes and Gillian Colclough dwell on the different meanings taken a few decades apart (1608/1653) by a proverb(-epigram) against English bishops.

Elizabeth Horodowich enlightens the various functions of (and attitudes towards) gossip in sixteenth-century Venice by investigating the metalanguage employed to talk about it, from inconsequential *pettegolezzi* to politically momentous *brogli*, while Joseph T. Snow

explains how the versatile procuress protagonist of the Spanish "tragicomedy" *Celestina* derives her power of persuasion from a skilful and cunning use of gossip and storytelling.

In the last section, Virginia Reinburg examines the manuscript, printed and annotated pages of early-modern French books of hours, around whose prayers the spoken and the written intertwined for centuries. Rosanna Cantavella turns attention to medieval erotic manuals, such as the fourteenth-century Catalan *Facet*, which taught schoolboys the most effective words to seduce (and actions to force) a woman. The fifteenth-century Valencian abbess Isabel de Villena is studied by Lesley Twomey, who in some sermons of her *Vita Christi* identifies traces of Isabel's preaching within the convent, undocumented otherwise.

Finally, Michael Braddick's "Afterword" reflects upon some of the main issues raised by the contributors, including the non-verbal components of oral communication, the relationship between spoken and written versions, how talk interacted with power, reputation and social relations; how speech spread knowledge and opinion; how orality informed written works.

An extensive *Bibliography* and a profitable *Index* complete the volume, further enriched by ten illustrations (seven in Willumsen's chapter).

Social and cultural historians are the primary target audience of this collection, while literary topics (although emphasised in the blurb and the introduction) are addressed by just four essays. Orality is pivotal in some chapters, subsidiary in others. Nevertheless, thanks to the wide scope of its case studies, together with the methodological relevance of some, this collection has undoubtedly something valuable to offer to anyone interested in the study of oral culture and communication as an opportunity to sharpen and even transform our understanding of the Renaissance world.

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